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ABSTRACT

Elementary schools are ideal places to build the bridges between Chinese-Americans and the larger society. Studying the history of Chinese-Americans, examining their many contributions to the United States, and studying the contemporary Chinese-American population are good places to start. There are many books available to help students understand the plight of Chinese-Americans, including "Mountain of Gold" (Betty Lee Sung); "The Chinese Americans" (Milton Meltzer); "Dragonwings" (Laurence Yep); and "Fifth Chinese Daughter" (Jade Snow Wong). Other appropriate activities besides reading include discussions, Chinese American visitors in the classroom, and field trips to Chinatown. In depth studies, experiences, and personal contact with Chinese Americans create lasting impressions in the minds of elementary school children and these impressions help shape their attitudes. (KM)

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C&I 252 Teaching Social Studies
Professor Joseph Braun

May 7, 1991

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COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT ASSIGNMENT:

Building Bridges Between Chinese-Americans and Elementary School Classrooms

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The miracle of this nation is that people representing every religion, race, and culture found in the world can be gathered under one name--American. Yet, even as citizens of one nation, people of different ethnic backgrounds are still separated and divided by ignorance and indifference. Our young people still grow up learning very little about each other. That's a shame, because many of our ethnic groups have played significant roles in the development of our society; and continue to do so. Chinese-Americans make up one of these groups.

Although the Chinese-Americans have become known in recent years as members of the "model minority" or "America's trophy population" (Winnick, p. 23), they have yet to become well-known. Philip K. Chiu, a free-lance writer, responds to this saying, "I am fed up with being stereotyped as either a subhuman or superhuman creature...it is about time for the media to report on Chinese Americans the way they are...they are only human--no more and no less." Another Chinese-American, Teresa Fung, writes, "I wonder when I will no longer have to explain that I speak good English because it is my mother tongue. When will I be accepted as an American with a Chinese ethnic background and not as an 'Oriental' without an accent?" When indeed?

In the debut issue of Bridge Magazine, a publication for Aian-Americans, its editor, Margaret Loke, said that it was time to build a bridge between Chinese-Americans and the larger society. She's right. It is time to build bridges. Where people are separated by ignorance and indifference, bridges between them should be built on knowledge and personal contact. Elementary school classrooms are ideal places to build bridges.

When building a bridge in your classroom, you need to choose the best materials. When spanning the gap to Chinese-Americans, studying their history and meeting them face to face is an ideal combination. Let's first look at the history of Chinese-Americans by examining their many contributions to the United States, especially in California. Then we'll look at the Chinese-American population as it is today. Finally we'll discuss some specific books and activities to help you build bridges in your classroom.

There were few Chinese in the United States before 1849. After the gold rush began, however, they began arriving in significant numbers. By 1851, 25,000 Chinese had made the perilous journey to California. They came from the poorest districts of Kwangtung in search of gold. To this day, the Chinese name for San Francisco is 舊金山 or "Old Gold Mountain."

As prospectors, the Chinese contributed new techniques to the gold mining industry. For example, they developed a successful technique for draining streams and collecting the gold found on the dry stream bed. Their success, however, earned them the resentment of other miners who later drove many of the Chinese out of mining.

The Chinese workers who left the mines crowded into the towns where they opened restaurants and other businesses to earn a living. Their restaurants and laundry businesses provided a badly needed service to the mining towns.

Although cooking and washing clothes were important services provided by the Chinese, we remember the Chinese of that era most for their work on the transcontinental railroad. Between 1865 and 1869, 90% of the Central Pacific work force was Chinese. At one time Chinese railroad workers numbered more than 10,000. Reporting

to President Andrew Jackson in October 1865, Governor Stanford praised the Chinese workers saying, "Without them it would be impossible to complete the Western portion of this great national enterprise within the time required by the Acts of Congress." Numerous books record the story of this great feat and its hardships.

Not as well known, however, is the reclamation of swamp land by Chinese laborers. Beginning years before the railroad, Chinese workers did the backbreaking work of building miles and miles of levees, ditches, dikes and canals. Much of present-day San Francisco stands on land reclaimed by Chinese labor.

The reclaimed land was quickly turned into farms and orchards. The farmers preferred hiring Chinese laborers, because they had shown they were able to pick and pack fruit without bruising it. One newspaper praised their work saying, "it is difficult to see how our annual fruit crop could be harvested and prepared for market without the Chinaman."

Most of the Chinese immigrants had been farmers in China, as had their ancestors before them for thousands of years. Some worked in America as sharecroppers. As farmers, they made many contributions to American agriculture. For example, bing cherries are named for the Chinese farmer who developed them. Chinese farmers also developed better oranges, apples and peanuts.

The Chinese are also credited with establishing the first fishing industry in the West. Fisherman from China introduced to the American West seafood delicacies such as crab, lobster, shrimp and abalone.

Chinese immigrants also manned the factories that manufactured

goods needed during the Civil War. Some Chinese eventually started their own companies.

In Mountain of Gold, author Betty Lee Sung summed up the contributions of the pioneer Chinese: "Theirs were the muscles," she writes, "that opened up the bowels of the earth and wrested . om her the riches of gold to add to the wealth of the nation. They tilled the land and harvested the fruit so that the vast hordes pouring into the West to populate and tame the wilderness would not hunger...Their feats and heroism in the construction of the transcontinental railroads and tributaries are recorded in history. Their industry and physical stamina salvaged for the West millions of acres of the richest farm lands and urban real estate. They could not have given more!"

The history of Chinese-Americans, however, is not complete if our students do not know how the Chinese immigrants were rewarded for all their contributions.

The Chinese were unfairly taxed, threatened with violence, underpaid, and pushed out of one industry after another. There was little they could do to fight back. The laws were against them. In 1854, a California court decision specifically banned the Chinese from testifying against a white man in court. This law allowed crimes against Chinese to go unpunished. The common belief was that the Chinese were an inferior race.

Hatred of the Chinese continued to grow until the depression of the 1870s. The Chinese were blamed for all the economic woes of the post-gold rush era. "The Chinese must go!" was the rallying cry adopted by the politicians of the day. Local, state, and federal governments passed more anti-Chinese legislation. California even

made March 4, 1880 a legal holiday for anti-Chinese demonstrations.

Riots frequently broke out against Chinese. There was much bloodshed. The Chinese fled the countryside and crowded into Chinatowns for protection. Chinese were forced to pay more special taxes and fees; they could not own land; and their children could not attend public schools.

The most significant legislation affecting Chinese was the famous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This act suspended immigration of Chinese laborers and barred all Chinese in America from becoming American citizens. Later acts forbade the return of Chinese who left the United States and required Chinese in the U.S. to carry photo passports at all times. In 1924, another immigration act banned all Asians, including the wives and children of Chinese people already living here, even those who were citizens of the United States by birth.

The exclusion acts made it very difficult, and finally impossible, for Chinese wives to join their husbands here in the United States. In 1390 there were 27 Chinese men for every Chinese woman in the United States. Many Chinese men who were stranded here, away from their wives and children, returned to China. For many years, the emigration of Chinese was greater than their immigration.

During World War II the anti-Chinese laws finally began to loosen. In 1943 Congress repealed the Exclusion Act of 1882. Once again Chinese were allowed to immigrate to the United States. The new law limited the number of Chinese immigrants to 105 a year until 1962 when the quota was discontinued. In 1965 all laws limiting immigration on the basis of race or nationality were abolished.

After laws against Chinese immigration were abolished,

immigration from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong greatly increased. Before World War II, there were only 77,000 Chinese in America. By 1980 there were 812,000 Chinese in America. Between 1980 and 1989 more than 350,000 Chinese immigrated to the United States from China and Taiwan, boosting the total Chinese-American population over the one million mark. Even at their present numbers, Chinese-Americans still make up less than one half of one percent of the total population in the United States. Their political and social influence, therefore, is only felt in some areas of California, New York, and Hawaii where many Chinese live.

The Chinese-American population includes people born in the United States and people born overseas. Because of recent increases in immigration, more than 63% of the Chinese-American population is overseas-born. Of those, most are from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Ethnic Chinese, however, have come from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and other countries. They continue to come for greater freedom and opportunities not available in their own countries.

At one time people thought that Chinatowns would all disappear. Chinatowns across the nation were decreasing in number and size. Chinese families that could, moved out of the rundown Chinatowns in search of a better life. The increase in new arrivals in recent years, however, have revitalized the Chinatowns. Brand new Chinese communities have started. For example, much of Monterey Park, California has come to be known as "Little Taipei" for the more than 45,000 Taiwan Chinese that have settled there. Near large cities, like Los Angeles and Chicago, you'll find Chinese shopping plazas and supermarkets. There are Chinese television programs, radio stations and newspapers. In many communities across America there

are small Chinese schools where Chinese-American children learn to speak, read, and write Chinese on weekends or after regular school. In many places across the country new Chinese arrivals can feel right at home.

Studying the history of Chinese-Americans is made easier for all the good books for young people available on that subject. Two good examples include The Chinese Americans by Milton Meltzer and An Illustrated History of the Chinese in America by Ruthanne Lum McCunn. Both of these books contain photographs dating back to the second half of the last century.

Though history books are good, a good historical novel is helpful for really getting inside the history of Chinese-Americans. Dragonwings, by the noted Chinese-American author, Laurence Yep, is one of the best historical novels on the subject. Dragonwings describes life in San Francisco's Chinatown around the time of the great earthquake of 1906.

Biographies of Chinese are also useful. Jade Snow Wong's autobiography, Fifth Chinese Daughter, gives the junior high and high school reader a window into the world of a Chinese-American girl growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown between the world wars.

The books mentioned above, as well as others in the resource list are good for understanding the background of Chinese in America. Other books, however, are more useful for acquainting students with Chinese-Americans today. An excellent example is Wesley Paul, Marathon Runner by Julianna Fogel. This is the biography of nine-year-old Wesley Paul who distinguished himself as a record-breaking marathon runner. The story of Wesley Paul can help young students see that Chinese-American children are not

really that much different from them.

Americans, Too!, an activity book by Jerry Aten, provides discussion questions that may be used when studying the backgrounds of Chinese-Americans and other ethnic groups. The following discussion questions are adapted from Aten's book:

> The discrimination and hard feelings against the Chinese eventually resulted in violent acts, property destruction, even death to victimized Chinese. What reasons can you think of for people engaging in such barbarism? What possible justification could they have for such behavior?
>
> For what reasons do you think the Chinese lived in concentrated areas rather than scattering throughout and becoming more "Americanized?"

Besides book learning, with what else can you build bridges? While activities like making Chinese dragons or making Chinese lanterns have their place, they really are not the best materials for building bridges to Chinese-Americans. Materials and activities intended for teaching students about Chinese-Americans should be distinguished from those intended for teaching students about the Chinese people in China. It is important for students to learn that the difference between Chinese-Americans and Chinese in China is that Chinese-Americans are Americans. China and Chinese culture, though related to Chinese-Americans, are different topics.

A few appropriate activities can be done in the classroom using

a few sheets of a Chinese newspaper printed in the United States. First teach children the Chinese numbers (below). Then give them a Chinese newspaper and have them circle all the Chinese numbers they can find on their newspaper.

一	二	三	四	五	六	七	八	九	十
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

The Chinese newspaper can then be used as a starting point for discussion questions such as these:

Why do you think Chinese newspapers are printed in the United States?

Do you think all Chinese-Americans can read a newspaper printed in Chinese? Which Chinese-Americans do you think read Chinese newspapers? Which do not?

In China, do you think there are newspapers printed in English for Americans or Englishmen that live there?

Besides newspapers, what other special things do you think Chinese-Americans might use that are less common to other Americans?

So far, we have discussed a few ways to help students increase their knowledge of Chinese-Americans. Now it is time to discuss a

second component of building familiarity with Chinese-Americans, that is personal contact. If your students are in an area where there are few Chinese-Americans, all the book learning and activities with which you can provide them can not bridge the gap between them and Chinese-Americans. The following are a few suggestions for giving your students first hand experience with different segments of the Chinese-American population.

A field trip to Chinatown will go a long way in reinforcing and improving perceptions of what your students have already studied about Chinatown. Though San Francisco's Chinatown is the most well-known, the Chinatown in Chicago has much to offer. Besides restaurants, grocery and hardware stores, and gift shops, the Chicago Chinatown has a school and the Chinatown branch of the Chicago Public Library. Make arrangements for your class to visit the school. Be sure to visit the library. There they can see the many Chinese newspapers, magazines, and books. A study trip to Chinatown gives students an opportunity to compare both the old and the new in Chinatowns today.

A trip to Chicago's Chinatown should be balanced with a stop at the Diho Supermarket in Westmont, Illinois. In contrast to Chicago's Chinatown, Diho supermarket is a modern shopping center serving the needs of Chinese-Americans living in the suburbs of Chicago. All sorts of Chinese foods and kitchen supplies are available. A stop at Diho plaza helps students recognize both similarities and differences between themselves and Chinese-Americans. Both places provide students with first-hand looks at places that are distinctly Chinese-American.

Are there Chinese-Americans in your community? Invite them to

come to your classroom to speak about their background or family history. Your students could prepare a list of questions to ask the visitor. The visitor could also prepare a list of questions to ask students about their ethnic backgrounds. An exchange of questions about ethnic backgrounds will promote the idea that every American belongs to an ethnic group.

In depth studies, experiences, and personal contact with Chinese-Americans create lasting impressions in the minds of elementary school children. These impressions will help shape their attitudes; the same attitudes that will someday rub off on their children. When attitudes about other people change, a bridge is built between them.

Classroom Resources

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